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**Fantasy and Reality in African American  
Historical Narrative**

**---A Study of Gothic Elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

**非裔美国人历史叙事中的虚幻与现实  
——托尼·莫里森小说《宠儿》中的哥特研究**

**刘颖晴**

指导教师姓名：林斌 副教授

专 业 名 称：英语语言文学

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## Abstract

*Beloved*, Toni Morrison's fifth novel, by which Morrison won the Nobel Prize in 1993, has aroused widespread interest and acclaim. There are a lot of readers and critics who have been trying to read and study it from different perspectives informed by various critical theories such as feminism, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, formalism and so on. This thesis focuses on the appropriation and innovation of western Gothic conventions in Morrison's *Beloved*. Morrison uses the combination of reality and fantasy, the latter covering supernatural descriptions of a haunting ghost and its return from the grave and the spiritually twisted characters, which endows the book with profound messages and earthshaking power. Morrison follows the western Gothic tradition, but she makes innovative use of the Gothic conventions, by which she deconstructs the African American history dominated by the white voices and reconstructs it in the black voices.

This thesis includes three chapters besides introduction and conclusion. The introduction presents a general survey of Toni Morrison and her novel *Beloved*, and also puts forward the argument of this thesis.

Chapter One discusses the traditional Gothic elements in *Beloved*. Chapter Two analyzes Toni Morrison's appropriation and innovation of the Gothic conventions. Firstly, Morrison breaks the lurid fantasy of the traditional Gothic fiction by setting *Beloved* in the historical reality and by arranging the plot on the basis of historical facts. Secondly, the ghost figure Beloved is used to achieve several functions. It is portrayed as the embodiment of the repressed past which serves as both the pain and the cure. Thirdly, Morrison's representation of gender roles differs from the traditional Gothic fiction, as illustrated by Sethe as a new type of Gothic heroine and the failure of Paul D and other male characters to perform their masculinity, which makes their image somewhat different from the stereotype of male characters in Gothic novels.

Fourthly, different from the traditional happy ending, Morrison utilizes the open ending to leave more space for readers to contemplate the fate of Sethe and the whereabouts of Beloved. Lastly, Toni Morrison breaks the Gothic narrative conventions by combining African-American narrative conventions and the western literary conventions. Chapter Three analyzes the appearance and disappearance of the ghost to bring out not only the haunting past but the healing process in the major characters of *Beloved*.

Finally, the conclusion of the thesis is drawn that Morrison's appropriation and innovation of the Gothic conventions has worked out effectively and successfully in dealing with trauma, with history, and has worked out successfully in fulfilling the African Americans' healing process and cultural reconstruction.

**Key words:** Toni Morrison; *Beloved*; Gothic elements

## 摘 要

《宠儿》是托尼·莫里森的第五部小说，她也是凭借此书获得了 1993 年的诺贝尔文学奖。《宠儿》一经问世便广受追捧和关注。许多读者和评论家分别从不同角度研究和探讨这部作品，比如借助于女性主义、心理分析、文化研究、形式主义等理论视角。本文重点在于分析《宠儿》中传统哥特成分的运用以及创新元素。莫里森运用现实与虚幻结合的方法，通过闹鬼和死人还魂等怪诞情节、心理扭曲的人物塑造等手法使作品具有更深刻的思想内涵和更强大的震撼力。莫里森遵循了传统哥特表现手法，进一步发展及创新了传统哥特小说，解构了那段由白人占主导地位的历史并通过补充黑人的声音重建了那段历史。

除引言和结语两部分外，本论文主要有三章。引言部分主要介绍托尼·莫里森的生平和她的小说《宠儿》，并且提出本文的主要观点。

第一章简要论述了《宠儿》中体现出的传统哥特元素。第二章分析了莫里森对传统哥特元素的发展及创新，主要分为以下五部分。首先，莫里森打破了传统哥特小说的虚构性，将真实的历史推向了前台。其次，宠儿这一鬼魂形象被用来实现多个目的。宠儿是过去那段被压抑的历史的化身，既是痛苦的根源又是治愈的方法。再次，莫里森一改传统哥特小说中的人物形象刻画，将塞丝这一哥特女主角进行全新的塑造，并一改男性刻板形象，将小说中男性人物进行了女性化处理。再者，小说的结局并非是以往哥特小说中所描绘的大团圆结局，而是采用了开放式的结尾形式，莫里森借此引发读者对塞丝结局及宠儿去向的可能性的思考。最后，莫里森打破了传统哥特小说的叙事模式，把非裔美国文学的叙事传统和西方文学的传统叙事模式结合起来。第三部分分析了鬼魂的出现和消失。作者借助于鬼魂的意象展现了美国黑人的苦难历史以及小说主要人物的创伤愈合过程。

最后，本文得出结论：莫里森成功并有效地沿袭了哥特式小说的基本模式，为它注入了新的活力。这在反映小说中的主要人物如何对待磨难、对待历史的创伤及整个美国黑人群体重塑身份与修复创伤方面起到了积极的作用。

**关键词：**托尼·莫里森；《宠儿》；哥特成分

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## Introduction

### 1. Toni Morrison and Her Novels

Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio in 1931. Her parents had moved to the North to escape the problems caused by the wide-spread and deep-rooted southern racism and she grew up relatively unscarred by racial prejudices. In 1949 she entered Howard University in Washington, D.C., the most distinguished black college in America. Upon graduation, she pursued her studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York and received her M.A. in 1955. While teaching at Howard University and caring for her two children, Morrison wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and the Nobel Prize in 1993 for the novel *Beloved* (1987), which established her position in American literature as a first-rate novelist.

### 2. *Beloved* and Gothic

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison uses a historical event as the basis of her story. Set during the Reconstruction era in 1873, the novel centers on the haunting past and history. For the former slaves in the novel, the past is a burden that they desperately and willfully try to forget. Yet for Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, memories of slavery are inescapable. *Beloved* focuses on Sethe, a former slave who escaped from a Kentucky plantation known as "Sweet Home" in 1855. The traumatic events of her past, including an attempted suicide and her decision to murder her baby daughter in an attempt to save her from bondage, are narrated in discontinuous flashbacks. Having been released from prison through the aid of abolitionists, Sethe lives with her youngest daughter, Denver, in an isolated farmhouse near Cincinnati, Ohio, and believes that the ghost of her deceased daughter haunts the house. The novel opens with the unannounced arrival of Paul D, "the last of the Sweet Home men" (6), whose

attempt to form a sexual relationship with Sethe is thwarted by a mysterious woman named "Beloved", whom Sethe and Denver believe to be an incarnation of Sethe's dead daughter. Although rumored to be a ghost, Beloved becomes Paul D's lover as well as a close friend to Denver. Beloved's real target, actually, is Sethe. Beloved, greedy for Sethe's love, intends to punish Sethe with guilt and humiliation. Because of Sethe's guilt and the "rememory" of the tortured slavery, Beloved is able to take over Sethe's mind, body and heart. Beloved increasingly consumes Sethe and becomes happier and plumper while Sethe deteriorates by day. Sethe is on the brink of collapse. In the end, with the help of the black community, Beloved vanishes, and Denver has become mature and Paul D returns to settle down to look after Sethe, offering her hope for the future.

In order to explore slavery as the haunting history and its effects on the main characters, Morrison adopts a lot from the Gothic novel, which is characterized by horrific setting, mysterious plots, supernatural intervention and imprisoned and haunted heroines. In *Beloved*, Sethe finds it hard to tell anyone her terrible experience for she views them as signs of shame. Therefore, the Gothic genre, a non-conventional form of literature, is ready for telling trauma by means of supernatural intervention. In a sense, Gothic genre provides an effective way to present and deal with trauma.

The first Gothic novel came into being in 1764, when Horace Walpole published his first novel *The Castle of Otranto* and established the early classical Gothic novel mode. It influenced the history of literature a great deal, especially the Romantic literature, for the genre mainly deals with emotional extremes and dark themes which are the rejection of clarity and rationalism. The late twentieth century saw a burgeoning in the academic study of Gothic fiction at college and university levels and in publications connected to them. In *Gothic Fiction*, Jerrold E Hogle points out in the introduction:

There is no question that the Gothic, particular in prose or verse narrative, theatre,

and film—all of which we here encompass in the phrase ‘Gothic fiction’—has become a long-lasting and major, albeit widely variable, symbolic realm in modern and even postmodern western culture, however archaic the Gothic label may make it seem. (Hogle, 2002: 7)

It is difficult to explain the reasons for the persistence of the Gothic across modern history and how and why so many changes and variations have occurred in this curious mode for over 250 years. Nevertheless, given how relatively constant some of the Gothic features are, we can specify some general elements by which fictional works can be identified as primarily or substantially Gothic. Hogle summarizes in the introduction of *Gothic Fiction*: “A Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space” (Hogle, 2002:7). It could be an old castle, abandoned or occupied; it might be an old house or mansion with secret passages, dark or hidden staircases. The feeling of mystery and terror fills the air. “Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are some hidden secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story” (Hogle, 2002:7). Chris Baldick, in his introduction to an anthology of Gothic tales, has also attempted to outline some of the conventions:

typically a Gothic tale will invoke the tyranny of the past (a family curse, the survival of archaic forms of despotism and of superstition) with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present (the liberty of the heroine or hero) within the dead-end of physical incarceration (the dungeon, the locked room, or simply the confinements of a family house closing in on itself). (Baldick, 1993: xix)

Gothic horror has also cast its spell on some mainstream American writers such as Henry James, Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. However, writers who might

more typically be read and studied as part of a multicultural or feminist course of study have also explored their themes by using Gothic horror and its conventions, such as Mary Shelley, Isabel Allende, and Toni Morrison. The present thesis hereby offers a focused study of Toni Morrison, who frequently uses Gothic elements in her African-American novels, *Beloved* in particular.

Critics have noted certain Gothic elements in Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon* (1977) was Morrison's first novel to explicitly incorporate mythical and supernatural elements into the narrative as a way for characters to transcend their everyday lives. *Tar Baby*, published in 1981 and set in Caribbean, again uses myths and ghostly presences to mitigate the harshness of lives in which all relationships are adversarial—particularly in cultures where blacks are opposed to whites and women are opposed to men. In *Beloved*, the characters are deprived of all aspects of ancestry—mates, children, forebears and the sense of selfhood and dignity that they hold, and most importantly, the ability to love. The elements of the mythical and supernatural that have marked all of Morrison's works are the most prominent in *Beloved*.

Some scholars have noticed the Gothic conventions presented in *Beloved*, such as Cedric Gael Bryant in his “ ‘The Soul has Bandaged Moments’ Reading the African American Gothic in Wright's *Big Boy Leaves Home*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and Gomez's *Gilda*”, and Philip Goldstein in his “Black Feminism and the Canon Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* And Morrison's *Beloved* as Gothic Romance”; both of them define *Beloved* as a Gothic novel while they try to make a comparative study between *Beloved* and other novels. A. Timothy Spaulding in *Reforming the Past: history, the fantastic, and the postmodern slave narrative* covers many African American writers, particularly in the last decades of the twentieth century, and seeks to redefine the way people narrate the slave experience. He points out that “Writers such as Ishmael Reed, Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison set out to correct the limited historical record on slavery” (Spaulding, 2005: 2). He also states that these writers “use the fantastic and

genres like science fiction, the gothic novel, postmodern metafiction, and the vampire tale to claim authority over the history of slavery and the historical record” (Spaulding, 2005: 2). In “The Gothic at our Turn of the Century: Our Culture of Simulation and the Return of the Body” in the book edited by Fred Botting (2001), Hogle refers to Toni Morrison as the author who “frequently uses Gothic elements in portions of her African-American novels, and to the most fully Gothic of her works, *Beloved*” (Botting, 2001: 161). As to the role of myth, Elizabeth House’s essay “Toni Morrison’s Ghost: The Beloved Who is Not Beloved” discusses the work as “illustrate(ing) the destruction of family ties brought by slavery” through the use of Gothic myth (House, 1990: 17-26). Similarly, in “Nameless Ghost: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*”, Deborah Horvitz provides a thematic analysis of *Beloved*, noting Morrison’s focus on bonding, bondage, alienation, loss, memory, and mother-daughter relationships.

In China, Yang Ling in Hunan Normal University mentions *Beloved* as “Female Gothic.” Luo Yi presents us the traumatic history and experience of the slaves in Gothic narrative context which captures the metaphorical expression of “rape” in her “The Realization of Metaphor Utterance of ‘Rape’ by means of the Gothic Narrative—On *Beloved* by Toni Morrison”. Xiong Ying, in her paper “*Beloved* in Female Gothic Perspective”, tries to interpret *Beloved* from the perspective of Female Gothic and analyzes the Gothic factors and their relationship with the characters in the novel.

In *Beloved*, Morrison presents us an imagined historical narrative in which the supernatural functions as history, or the past. The combination of reality and illusion, the horrific sections of the haunting ghost and its return from the grave, and the spiritually twisted characters altogether make the book full of mystery and other gothic elements. The haunted 124 and the characterization of the title character are the most prominent gothic features. *Beloved*’s return represents the return of the repressed, the return of all dead enslaved Africans. In *Cultural Haunting*, Kathleen Brogan points out

that "Ghosts in contemporary American ethnic literature function similarly: to re-create ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present" (Brogan, 1998: 4). In order to recover or re-create national identity, the Gothic style here offers a way to express what has remained unspeakable throughout the historical narrative. According to Brogan, he defines historical consciousness as a good form of haunting, in which the ghosts of the past are finally recuperated and facilitate the establishment of America's national identity. Unlike traditional hauntings of the ghost which reveal some hidden family secrets or evoke the feeling of terror, these hauntings of the ghost transform from bad to potentially good form, from negative to positive throughout the historical narrative. As it is, "[t]he movement reflects the desire both to articulate fears about ethnic reconstruction and to claim such redefinition as finally rejuvenating to tradition" (Brogan, 1998: 13).

### **3. Arguments Presented in the Thesis**

Critics have done a lot of research on *Beloved* from the Gothic perspective, yet further studies on this area still attract people's great attention. This thesis, therefore, intends to analyze the Gothic elements of *Beloved*. Toni Morrison creatively combines the Gothic elements with the historical reality of the African-American people and presents the history of the long-suffering African American people as a haunting nightmare of the institution of slavery. The focus, however, on slavery as a ghost plaguing the psyche of black descendants of slavery is to facilitate their healing. The healing process of Sethe, Denver and Paul D implies that ghosts from the historical past can be recognized and exorcised. Historical past and consciousness, as a good form of haunting, are finally integrated into America's national identity. As a result, the development of the Gothic traditions creates an immeasurable effect that helps to reconstruct the African American history, to strengthen the theme of condemning the slavery system.



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